

BIPOLAR DISORDER (MANIC DEPRESSION)

Roller coaster rides of emotion from frantic highs to devastating lows are the classic signs of manic-depressive illness.

Also known as manic depression, bipolar disorder is one of the most treatable mental illnesses, but left untreated it can cause mental suffering, disruption of family life, poor job performance, and reckless or dangerous behavior.

Symptoms

A person with bipolar disorder experiences mood swings from mania to depression, with a "normal" period between these cycles of ups and downs. The length of the cycles varies from a few days to several months and they can occur without warning.

During the manic phase, a person may: feel "on top of the world" and have an abundance of energy; seem to talk and think faster and espouse a number of ideas; think he/she is invincible, leading to reckless behavior and acts that may endanger one's life or well-being; have delusions of fame or believe he/she has a special relationship with a famous person; and experience sleeplessness, be easily distracted, and often, be irritable.

During the depressive phase, a person may: feel hopeless and lose all interest in other people or usual activities; experience weight fluctuation and feel tired all the time; sleep more than usual or have insomnia; and complain of unexplained aches or pains and have trouble concentrating. A person in the depressive phase is a suicide risk.

The symptoms of the depressive stage are the same as for clinical depression, a different mental illness that does not have the manic phase. Bipolar disorder mimics several physical disorders and only a comprehensive physical and mental health evaluation can provide an accurate diagnosis.

Causes

The causes of manic depression are uncertain, but there are factors known to play a role.

- Heredity: Bipolar disorder runs in families and may be carried by a gene inherited from one or both parents.

- Chemical changes: Persons with bipolar disorder have chemical changes in the brain that continue to be studied for their cause and effect.
- Stress: Situations that cause unusual stress, such as physical illness or money problems, may trigger a manic-depressive episode.

As with any mental illness, bipolar disorder is not a sign of moral weakness or caused by something the person did or did not do. And, as with any mental illness, it cannot be willed away and will not go away if left untreated.

Treatment

A person with bipolar disorder who receives proper treatment can lead a normal life at work and home. Hospitalization is rare and only necessary if the person is a threat to him or herself or to others.

There are three methods of treating bipolar disorder.

- Medication: The most common is lithium carbonate. It works by maintaining chemical balances in the brain to prevent mood swings. Other drugs may be used to treat the symptoms of depression. The medications can have side effects, sometimes severe enough to rule out their use. Constant monitoring of the levels of drugs in the body and their effects is essential. It also may take time to determine the correct dosage, but many people with manic depression are successfully and safely treated using drug therapy.
- Psychotherapy: Used to help a person deal with the illness, its causes, and its effect. Through psychotherapy, persons can learn to deal with situations and people in ways that avoid triggering a manic-depressive episode. The therapy also helps a person develop a positive self-image and attitude -- both essential for good mental health.
- Electroconvulsive therapy: Also known as shock treatments, this is used in more severe cases and only when other therapies prove ineffective or cannot be used. Some research says that electroconvulsive therapy is safer and has fewer side effects than medication.

A key to successful treatment of bipolar disorder is the person with the illness. It is the individual's responsibility to take his/her medication, to consult with a physician before taking other drugs, to inform the physician of other physical conditions (especially pregnancy), to eat a healthy diet, to monitor medications and their effects, and to attend therapy sessions.

Families and friends also play a vital part. A person with bipolar disorder needs encouragement and reinforcement. Family members should be supportive, be able to recognize the symptoms of manic depression, and know how to obtain professional help, especially if the person has threatened suicide.

Additional help is available from community mental health centers, a local manic depressive support group, or the National Depressive and Manic Depressive Association. The association's address is: NDMDA, P.O. Box 1939, Chicago, IL, 60690. The phone number is 312-939-2442. Or, contact the Missouri Department of Mental Health at 573-751-9482.